

Promoting social justice and conserving montane forest environments: a case study of Nepal's community forestry programme

NETRA PRASAD TIMSINA

Forest Action, Ekantakuna, PO Box 12207, Katmandu, Nepal

E-mail: forestaction@wlink.com.np

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This paper analyses participatory forest policy and the ways it has influenced the relationships between people as it relates to the forest resource management. This case study was conducted in the middle hills of Nepal, and information was collected through direct observation, individual interviews, group discussion and secondary information analysis. It substantiates a few examples of how the community forestry programme can be used as a means to promote the participation of the women, the poor and *dalit* (untouchables) in forest resource management, as well as enhancing social justice and improving the forest resources in their locality. However, it also demonstrates that though the community forestry programme has a positive impact, it faces several constraints and challenges. The local Forest User Group is controlled by a few élites making the poor and disadvantaged vulnerable to further marginalization. The results of the case study strongly indicate that community forestry processes must address the political, economic and social needs of the forest users, and also provide a neutral platform on which the poor can present their cases.

KEY WORDS: Nepal, community forestry policy, Forest User Groups, social structure, poor and disadvantaged people

Introduction

This paper examines the Forest User Group (FUG; a local Nepali institution for forest resource management), the ways in which the poor, women and other disadvantaged groups of forest users are involved in forest resource management, and how changes in social relationships between these different groups of people are brought about. It also discusses the threats and challenges that prevent the poor and disadvantaged people from benefiting from community forestry.

Participation of people in development activities to achieve social justice has been a core concept in recent development discourses (Agarwal 2001). Social justice relates to the distribution of roles and resources among members of a community in terms of social, political and economic decision making (Jordan 1998). Therefore, there has been a recent trend that all development policies should

include a participatory component. In terms of the policy contexts, active participation of the poor, and marginalized and disadvantaged groups are sought, particularly in respect of local actions such as natural resource management and local development activities. In other words, the inclusion in decision making of those most affected by the proposed development interventions is seen as social justice (Agarwal 2001; Kothari 1999). Participation should seek to create power structures that enable the orthodoxies of the past and of existing social structures to be challenged (Oakley and Marsden 1985; Agarwal 1994; Nelson and Wright 1995; Raymond and Sinead 1997). Indeed, in the context of natural resource management, devolving greater power to village communities is now widely recognized as an institutional imperative by governments, international agencies and NGOs. Moreover, rural community forestry groups represent one of the most widespread and rapidly expanding

attempts at participatory development (Agarwal 2001; Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Malla 2001), which aims to achieve equity and justice in society.

The concept of participation by local people in Nepal's forest management was officially initiated in the early 1950s, but it only gained momentum in the early 1970s due to a shift in development thinking and practice (Bartlett and Malla 1992). The 1970s is seen as a 'push decade' for community forestry in Nepal; the push coming from external agencies' interests in being involved in the forestry sector as well as with needs identified by groups within Nepal (Hobley and Malla 1996; Colchester 1995). The 1980s was a period of experimentation with different forms of community forestry practices which led to the development of a 20-year Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS) in 1989. A new political era for Nepal began at the beginning of the 1990s and, consequently, a new era for the forest sector as well. Users of the forest resources became recognized in terms of forest management and utilization (Hobley and Malla 1996).

However, in the late 1990s Nepal's community forestry policy faced anomalies in its implementation and explanation. The government constantly exhibited reluctance in accepting policy implementation, and amended the forest acts by making a provision for government control over the FUG (Britt 2001; Ambus and Shrestha 2001; Mahapatra 2001). Nevertheless, by this time the Federation of Community Forestry Users-Nepal and several other NGOs were active in the forestry sector and vehemently opposed the government's interest in taking control of forest resource management.

Research area

This paper is based on a field study carried out between September 1999 and July 2000 in Dhungeshwori community forest, which is located in eastern Dolakha district in the middle hills of Nepal, some 120 km east of Kathmandu. Dhungeshwori community forestry covers Wards 1, 2 and 3 of the Kavre Village Development Committee (VDC). A VDC in the rural areas in Nepal is the smallest political and government administrative unit and is usually divided into nine wards. Each VDC has a council with elected members from each ward, a chairperson and a vice chairperson.

The high castes, Brahmins and Chhetries, are the dominant groups in the VDC, followed by Sarki (shoemakers), Kami (blacksmiths), Damai (tailors), Sherpa and Jirel. Brahmins and Chhetries originated outside this area and arrived after having received the *Birta* (a land tenure system in which land is granted to the political and ruling élite in lieu of

supporting the ruling classes) award from the king some 700 years ago. Damai, Kami and Sarki were brought to the area by the Brahmins and Chhetries to serve them. Jirel and Tamang came to this area after they were awarded with the *Kipat* (a type of land tenure system granted to the community) by the king (Village priest personal communication 2000).

Although agriculture is the main occupation of most people in the VDC, most people face food shortages due to the low productivity and have to earn their living in other ways. A few wealthy individuals own the irrigated, fertile land. The others work as wage labourers for the rich landlords, and a significant number of people travel every year during the off seasons to Charikot and Kathmandu to work as daily wage labourers. A few household members work in trekking since the area is on a trekking route to Mount Everest; and some household members have permanent off-farm employment in the army and police department (Kavre VDC 1999).

Research methodology

The forest user households were categorized into three broad wealth groups – rich, medium and poor – with the help of ten key informants, such as school teachers, village priests, and local political and women's leaders. I then used the different categories of people as a basis to select household members for discussions and interviews. I interviewed 54 households in total. These comprised six rich, 23 medium and 25 poor households. I spent two months living with people in the field area, which helped me obtain reasonably reliable information. The information obtained was usually validated through triangulation. This was done by using different methods of data collection, and by cross referencing individual responses with those from group discussions and key informants.

Semi-structured and open-ended interview techniques were used in order to obtain in-depth information. I interviewed people in different situations, some were organized individually, and others in groups and subgroups with men and women at different levels.

I usually met people in local teashops, households, work places or in common areas. Every morning and evening, before and after work, people usually came to the local bazaar (market) to have a cup of tea and talk with each other, and I was able to speak to them at those times. In the case of wage earners, landless people, women and scheduled caste members, I visited their households in the early morning.

In addition to the individual interviews, information was obtained through small group discussions.

These groups comprised people who were identified as having similar interests and problems at the time of the individual interview. These people were brought together later in one place for a group discussion. Such an approach proved useful and helped me obtain more reliable information and provided different perspectives from different groups of people. Three group interviews were conducted with a group of Sarki, a group of non Sarki, and a group of representatives of local NGOs, clubs and cooperatives. I also organized two focus group discussions for each group on two specific issues. One discussion focused on the issue of benefit sharing from the community forestry, whilst the other concentrated on the issue of participation of the poor and marginalized people in decision making for forest resource use and management. The participants in the discussions were all from the poor wealth category. For each discussion, I selected five individuals who seemed to have the capacity to actively participate in and contribute to the discussions.

I was able to directly observe activities organized by the FUG and other relevant institutions in the village such as general assemblies and committee meetings, to gain insights into socio-political processes and the ways in which people make decisions in meetings and discussion forums. In particular, I made observations on how meetings were conducted, who decided which activities were to be undertaken, who were the speakers and whose interests they represented, whether the poor and women played any role in the process and whether their voices were heard and how the benefits were distributed.

A variety of secondary sources were used to obtain information. The existing literature on forest resource use and management, policy documents related to forest and land use, and field reports on rural livelihoods and farming systems were an important source of information for this study. Information obtained by reviewing the minutes, constitutions and operational plans of the FUG was particularly useful to cross check the information obtained through field discussions.

Positive policy impacts

Local governance of resource management

The FUG has been a major institution in decisions about the use and management of the forest resources at the village level. According to the FUG constitution, at least one member from each household must come together once or twice a year to discuss matters related to forest resource management and other aspects of development of

their village. It accommodates the diverse interests and needs of the users and organizes development activities such as construction of irrigation channels, drinking water facilities, development of road facilities and provides financial support to schools. Almost all members contribute to these activities voluntarily. There are no other organizations at the village level that provide opportunities for discussions about issues of concern to all people (FUG leader personal communication 2000). In this sense, the FUG is a strong instrument of governance at the local level in that it makes people think about and discuss their resources amongst themselves. In some cases, FUGs seem to be more effective than the local government institution (VDC) in delivering development activities at the village level (FUG chairman, personal communication 2000); a similar conclusion has been drawn from other studies of FUGs (FECOFUN 2000).

The social inclusion and exclusion debate

Nepal's rural area is made up of a complex social web, consisting of a hierarchical social structure that includes different economic and social classes, oppressive caste systems and gender discrimination (Bista 1991). However, the implementation of the community forestry programme in the case study area has been a catalyst in bringing about a change in the issue of social processes, albeit with negligible influence.

Female participation Women are the main beneficiaries sought by the community forestry policy. Participation by women in community forest management in the village has increased due to a change in perceptions about the capacity women have to make decisions related to the village as well as their family concerns. The community forestry process in the case study village is considered to be the catalyst that helped to initiate other groups and cooperatives in the area managed primarily by women. Results from the women's focus group indicate community forestry has an important catalytic role in bringing women out of the domestic domain. Women are encouraged to take part in community forestry activities by realizing that their contributions to forest management and conservation are important. This is also reflected in the FUG constitution for the village, which has a compulsory provision that at least a third of the committee members should be the women (Dhungeshwori FUG 1999). The contribution of women to protecting the forest in this village is therefore significant. In an interview with a group of women about their roles in forest management, all of the women present unanimously

accounted for their role in forest management as follows:

few years ago, in [the] dry summer season, there was an incidence of fire in the forest. The fire became more and more out of control. Unfortunately, that day all [of the] men of the village had gone to a picnic organized by a local club leaving the women and children behind. As soon as we saw the fire in the forest, all the women in the village went to the forest to put out the fire. Many of us carried our children with us. After several hours of hard work, we managed eventually to control the fire. It was really a great contribution we made for (*sic.*) our forest that day. If we had not acted in time, the forest would not have been in the same condition as we see it today.

Women group discussion 2000

Participation of poor and lower castes The case study area is densely populated with the lower caste Sarki, who are shoemakers. In general, the poor low caste Sarki users seem reasonably happy as their interests are addressed to a certain extent due to the right processes being used and because they have the sympathy of rich users in the area, e.g. they do take part in the meetings and assemblies related to forest management. Typical of the way Sarki users expressed their feelings is:

We attend the meetings and assemblies related to forest management. We send our children when we are busy. In assembly, issues are discussed like how to protect forest, how and when to distribute the forest products. We are getting benefit from forest. We get grasses for two months in a year and some firewood. We know all the committee members and discuss with them. We also participate in programmes like drama organized by FUG committee. We feel that we are being included in social activities in our village.

Sarki group discussion 2000

The community forest user committee organizes various programmes, such as street drama, to raise the awareness of forest users about their rights and responsibilities to use and manage forest resources, and discussion about village activities to be carried out. The Sarki take part and are able to put their points across in the discussion fora. Here a lower caste is represented on the FUG committee, but they have no such representation on any other village institutions. The role of the committee is to maintain the constitutional provision of the FUG and implementation of activities assigned by the general assembly of the forest users.

Attainment of social justice, however, remains a major concern for the Sarki. In a discussion about the social exclusion and inclusion of lower castes

in the use and management of forest resources, they explained that they are gradually being liberated from the exclusive and oppressive social systems that have been in place for much of their lives and their relationships with upper caste members has been changing. Previously, they were not allowed to sit together with upper caste people, but now they can eat and drink together in village teashops and the FUG office. Although they noted that there were still some committee members who did not like to sit and eat together with them, they hoped that these members would ultimately change.

Improvements to the degraded resource base

According to the forest users, the Dhungeshwori community forest was completely denuded before it was handed over to them as a community forest. After taking management responsibility, the local users planted trees and imposed a complete restriction on use for a few years.

Rules and regulations were established to protect the forest by the users themselves with the assistance of the District Forest Office (Village priest personal communication 2000). All the users, including women, lower castes and poor, were involved in the decisionmaking process which was aimed at reviving their local forest. After six to seven years of management by the local community, the formerly denuded area is 'now full with trees and other species of forests', and has 'started to fulfil the needs of local people' to some extent. According to a group discussion on land degradation, landslides and soil erosion in the area are completely under control after the rehabilitation of the forest.

Constraints and challenges

Although the community forestry policy in this area has provided some positive impacts, particularly in improving the conditions of the poor and marginalized section of the community and the forest resource itself, constraints and challenges remain which need to be overcome if real and sustainable benefits are to be enjoyed by the poor and disadvantaged members of the community.

How democratic is the Forest User Group?

Though the FUG has been the major institution in encouraging the participation of all users in forest management, a major concern about decision making remains for the poor and marginalized. An analysis of the structure of the FUG revealed that the majority of committee members, i.e. those who

have the greatest power in deciding about the use and management of the local forest, represent the rich and élite of the village. For example, a general assembly of the FUG, which I observed, appeared to be dominated by a few people. When the secretary of the FUG committee asked for views to be incorporated in the operational plan, only five of 175 participants put forward their suggestions and ideas. Not only were the people who spoke in the meeting all from the élite, holding important positions in the community, they also suggested the introduction of heavy fines for people who breached the rules on forest protection, as well as an increase in membership fees to enlarge the FUG fund. They argued that with more money in the FUG fund they would be able to build a school and a road, invest in a drinking water scheme and use some money for prizes for competitions. Another member proposed raising the cash fines for those households who did not provide labour for forestry and other development activities of the FUG. All of the other members who attended the assembly were silent and the agenda proposed by the few powerful members was approved. In interviews later, the Sarki argued that all the decisions taken were against them as they could not send their children to the school that is supported by FUG funds and they could not participate in other activities organized by the FUG. In addition, they could not afford to pay the increased membership fee of the FUG, although this is a compulsory aspect of FUG membership. In summary, the decision-making process is not a truly democratic process as the arguments of the élite lead to agendas for community forestry which are most beneficial to their own interests.

How vulnerable are the poor and marginalized?

The organizational processes that lead to social justice depend primarily on the existing socio-economic structure and the power relations among and within the users (Barraclough and Ghimire 1995; Malla 2001). In a social process, no institution is autonomous, as it is always constrained and conditioned by social forces (Pathak 1994). If the existing exploitative power structure in communities such as these is not taken into consideration, there is likely to be further marginalization of the poor users (Timsina 2002).

Economically, the poor have to be active every day to sustain themselves and their family livelihoods. For them, being a FUG committee member does not provide any immediate benefit in respect of their basic needs; moreover, it is a waste of their productive time (Poor users group discussion 2000). While the poor need regular supplies

of forest products to sustain their livelihoods, any decisions to further protect the community forest work against their interests and needs. Furthermore, though the Sarki are represented on the FUG committee, they have no real power to influence the decisions which may affect them positively or negatively. They are still constrained by the existing oppressive social norms and regulations that subordinate them socially, politically and economically in local society. What often happens is that the élite in the community make a legitimate claim over a process in the name of participation of all sections of the community so as to manipulate a process to fulfil their needs and interests. In an interview, some poorer forest users expressed their views as follows:

... we do not have time to go [to] meeting[s] and take part in discussions, and we also do not know what is to be discussed, and how to discuss [it]. In the past, we were free and attended assemblies, but did not properly understand the decisions taken. We were not consulted about the rules and regulation of the forest use and management.

Poor users group discussion 2000

The following example shows how the situation is getting worse for the poor, even though the intention of the community forestry is to empower them:

A woman, abandoned by her husband, took a loan from the FUG's fund, for which she had to provide her land ownership certificate as collateral. Since there was no source of regular income, she could not repay the loan in time and in the meanwhile the interest charge continued to increase. After a while she was as a forest watcher so that she could use a part of her wage to pay the loan. After a few months hired by the forest user group, she fell ill and could not keep the job. One of her neighbours, who is the landlord and wanted to buy a piece of her land, started to create troubles for her. In the end, she decided to sell the land and move somewhere else for her livelihood. But she could not sell the land as her land certificate was still with the forest user group committee. She had to take another loan from elsewhere to pay the previous loan to get the certificate back.

Interview data

The poor users are most interested in maintaining a regular supply of forest products from the community forest. In interviews, it emerged that the poorer household members could not afford to buy firewood as it is very expensive, so they have no choice but to continue to use the community forest to obtain firewood. The FUG record book shows

that it is by and large the poor households who have paid the most fines for illegally using the forest. They also have to use other forest products – fodder, leaf litter and timber – illegally if the FUG do not allow their use. Consequently, if the use of these forest products is restricted it is the poor that are most likely to be marginalized from the community forest process as they have to buy these products, but their capacity to do this is limited and as a consequence their illegal collection of products has increased their exposure to fines and other forms of punishment.

Implications for future community forestry development

This study has presented both positive impacts and constraints of the application of community forestry policy to one village in Nepal. In particular, the issue of promoting social justice through local forest resource management has been the main focus of the research. In introducing community forestry policy the government has stimulated changes in social relations between different groups of people which has impacted on social inclusion and exclusion, and to some extent has liberated people from the caste system and reduced gender discrimination. However, major control over the implementation of community forestry policy at the local level still lies with the village élite, and only patchy elements of social justice accrue to the poor and marginalized.

In conclusion, it appears that Nepal's community forestry programme is stuck at some kind of a crossroads and a systematic approach needs to be developed which addresses the social, economic and political aspects of the poor and marginalized people in montane forest environments in particular.

The findings of this study lead to a number of implications for the concept of promoting social justice through forest management in the future.

- Community forestry involves a number of interest groups (such as poor and rich, men and women, lower caste and upper caste) and their social, political and economic interests drive their actions. Most community forestry facilitators at the local level are ill-equipped to analyse these social, political and economic issues.
- There is, at present, no platform for neutral facilitators to be used at the local level, whereby the poor and marginalized are allowed to present their cases for consideration fairly. The FUG assemblies at the local community level are rendered a less than useful platform for them as they are controlled by the local élites.

- The findings of the study also give rise to mixed responses concerning the whole idea of people participation and social justice, highlighting the fact that the application of a participatory process is dependent on the democratization of local institutions and power structures.

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